

# *A n a k S a s t r a*

## **Issue 27**

### **Issue 27 Contents**

#### *short fiction*

"No Fare" by Ardiono

"Your Merdeka Day Performance" by CA Yin

"Gracias Chopsticks" by Clifton Bates

#### *nonfiction*

"Dynamic Duo" by Ben Gumienny

#### *poems*

"A Body in Four Parts," "University Village," "In Secrecy," "Pasayahan Festival 2015," and "An Empirical Study on Perennial Things" by King Llanza

"George Town" by Shona Levingston

"Shopping for Pomelos at Central Market on Chinese New Year" by Robert Flinn

"Neighbours" by Malachi Edwin Vethamani

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## Contributor Bios

**Ardiono** is an Indonesian writer and poet. He has lived on eleven different islands in his life but never learned to swim. His writing appears in several online journals and magazines.

**CA Yin** lives in Sarawak, Malaysian Borneo, with her husband and two German Shepherd-Labrador mixed-breed dogs, Dana and Scully. She celebrates life teaching and interacting with her students in the classroom and in debate and green activities. Apart from reading and writing, she enjoys Skyping with her children who are studying in Kuala Lumpur and Glasgow.

**Clifton Bates** has lived in Alaska for forty years and is involved with Alaska Native education as a teacher, administrator and university professor. He has had a variety of plays, poetry, drawings, fiction and education articles published. He coauthored the book, *Conflicting Landscapes, American Education/Alaska Natives*, with the Very Rev. Dr. Oleksa. He has traveled often and lived for short time periods in parts of Asia.

**Ben Gumienny** is a Canadian currently based in Southeast Asia and staying in Penang, Malaysia. Ben has worked as a journalist, teacher and copywriter. He loves to write and has just completed the first draft of his first novel.

[King Llanza](#) is a 21-year-old aspiring writer from the Philippines. His writings take on memory, reality, and drifting thoughts. He can be very forgetful but through writing poems, he is able to remember.

**Shona Levingston** is an Australian writer living in Penang, Malaysia (for more than 6 years). Her published writing includes books and articles in education and science and a play (written and performed in Malaysia). She has a passion for poetry and South Korean traditional music.

**Robert Flinn** holds a MFA in Creative Writing from Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas, USA and is currently a Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Languages at Zaman University in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, where he

teaches various English courses as well as Business and Professional Communications and International Relations.

**Malachi Edwin Vethamani** is a poet and short story writer. His latest publication is an edited volume of poems entitled *Malchin Testament: Malaysian Poems* (Maya Press, 2017). In 2016, he published his first collection of poems entitled, *Complicated Lives* (Maya Press).

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## "No Fare"

by Ardiono

The smell of cloves blanketed the air. The day felt heavy as sweat droplets formed across my back. My shirt suctioned to my body. No breeze meant it would be a long day. I needed to earn more than I had yesterday so there was no going home until then. I hated long days.

"Ril! Come over here!"

I turned at the familiar call of my friend's voice. Yos was the only friend I had made since I arrived in Labuanbajo earlier in the year. I don't think he would consider me as his friend. I was just one of the many people he knew who worked at the airport. He had many friends and even more acquaintances. I was one of the latter.

"Ril, have you had breakfast yet?"

I nodded.

"How was your *date* last night? How far did you get?"

I thought he was just kidding asking me that. The only thing I could get to notice me was the mosquitoes. I hadn't been with a woman in over two years. But the curious look on his face showed that he, at least, believed that it was possible for me to have been out on a date recently. I then remembered that one of the new guys from Ende--newer than me, at least--had mentioned the plans he had to take his crush down to the beach last night. He had high hopes and probably exaggerated her looks and his chances. But at least he had the opportunity.

I shook my head. "Not me. I was at home all night."

He scoffed. "Someone else, eh? You new guys all look the same."

There definitely was no love for any outsider who took up work here. Many of the guys from the core group of drivers had been making the trip from the airport to the local hotels along the beach for decades. Isa had been doing this work for nearly five years now,

and he was still grouped together with the "new guys." The one difference between me and the new guys, though, was that they enjoyed this work. They enjoyed each other's company. They thrived in the short bursts of work and could enjoy the downtime between flights.

I felt out of place all day long. I still didn't know all the hotel names. My English was worse than the others. I didn't have the flight schedules memorized yet. The airport staff looked at me suspiciously no matter what I did or said to them. The biggest problem, though, was that nobody looked out for me. The cliques were clearly formed, and I was not a part of any of them.

"Denpasar just landed!"

The atmosphere changed immediately at the quiet airport sprang to life. The flights from Denpasar were the most nerve-wracking for me. The other drivers grinned widely, knowing that the potential income from overcharging international tourists would make or break their daily income quotas. For me, these flights from Bali just raised my anxiety levels. Tourists never spoke Indonesian. And if they did, I usually couldn't understand them. The rest of the time, they wanted my advice about what was good to see around the island or how to get out to see the komodo dragons. I could tell them a few tips. But not in English.

My English level also made haggling over the price more difficult. It happened far too often that I *think* the price I offer in English is a good rate, only to find out at the hotel that I said the wrong number. And I end up losing money after factoring in petrol costs. I would much rather drive Indonesians, but there is little excitement in that. The payment is guaranteed to be low. Still, taking a tourist is a gamble, and I lose too often to want to play that game anymore.

The first people from the Denpasar flight exit baggage claim. Some of the drivers sneak inside to negotiate directly with the tourists or wealthy Indonesians. I wait outside for the leftovers. A whole planeload full of people means there is enough for us drivers to share. Though the first ones to return usually get a second or even third fare out of it. It's not my style to force my services on anyone.

The big backpack sticking a foot above the tall white guy's head is the first thing I see through the crowd exiting the terminal. He walks by me.

"Hello mister. Taxi?"

He waves his hand and smiles but keeps walking. He is the cheap type of traveler and will probably try and walk to town to save money. Two more female backpackers pass me before I notice.

"Yes? Taxi?"

No reply. They don't hear me.

"Hello mister. Taxi?" I ask again, a little louder.

They are too far away to hear me. I turn and see some of the other drivers carrying luggage to their cars. They shout out hotel names like it is a competition to see who will get back quicker or who is going to the more expensive hotels in town. One or two even agree to make the drive further inland, as far as several hours away. I wait for someone requesting a short drive. I don't want to go too far.

"Hello mister. Taxi?" I approach a couple who look lost.

"We are looking for the rental car office. Where is it?"

Based on the accent, I assume they are from Jakarta. But they don't need a taxi. I shrug and walk off. I scan the baggage claim for more passengers, but I only see the usual suspects: bag handlers, customer service, and airline staff. None of the other drivers are still here. But neither are any passengers looking for taxis.

I pull out a cigarette and light it after sitting on the bench. Maybe when the next flight arrives, the other drivers will let me have the first passenger since I didn't get any from this flight. It just wouldn't be fair otherwise.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Your Merdeka Day Performance"**

by CA Yin

It is still dark when I go into your room and switch on the light. You would love to carry on sleeping, but it's a school day and time to get up. Your eyelids flicker slightly in the glare of the artificial light and when you open your eyes, they are hazy with sleep. A gentle kiss on your cheek and you smile so sweetly. Then you remember, and you leap out of bed. "Merdeka!" you shout, and I have to hush you because our neighbours might hear, and it is far too early for them to wake up.

Today is Independence Day, and this year you will be wearing your traditional Melanau costume to school. Last year, you were part of the Chinese Fan Dance troupe, with a beautiful flowing green costume and a fan to match. This time, the teachers decided on a multicultural dance with girls and boys dressed in many different traditional costumes. Some of the girls will wear a kebaya or baju kurung, while others will be dressed in cheongsams and sarees. As for you, you will be the only Melanau among the Iban, Bidayuh, Malay, Chinese and Indian girls.

It is too risky for you to put on the traditional costume before breakfast, so no one complains when you come to the breakfast table dressed in your pyjamas. A slice of toast with your favourite pandan-flavoured kaya is all you can eat. Papa makes sure you drink some warm Milo before you race to your room to put on your Melanau costume.

It's easy for you to slip on the red and gold sarong by yourself – the modern version has an elasticised waist with the pleat neatly sewn in place. The black satin top is harder as it has intricate embroidery and decorations that could catch in your long hair. After we carefully slip it over your head and straighten the blouse in place, I hand you the stringed pendant that you insist on putting on yourself. Then it's time for me to plait your hair and tie it up in a neat bun. You wanted the spray of flowers on the red hairband rather than the heavy headgear, and that was a good choice. It would be harder with the heavy headgear to

balance gracefully as you go through the dance movements, making the transitions from one cultural dance to the next.

When your hair has been neatly arranged, and the spray of flowers has been fixed securely, you remind me about the light makeup your teachers had requested. You're still young, but I realise this will be a request that will come more often and all too soon – and not just for stage performances. Once that's done, you walk carefully to the car; your white socks and school shoes at odds with the traditional costume, but they will be taken off before you go on stage. Together with the other dancers, you will dance barefoot. Before we depart, our dogs greet us, nosing our legs and nudging us gently. "Wish me luck!" You say as you pat them.

At the school, we drop you at the front entrance and then drive off to park the car with the many other eager parents who have their video cameras and phones ready to record their children's performance. After so many years of Independence Day and Teachers' Day performances, we expect to already encounter those parents who insist on being the earliest to arrive so they can get the best seats. We manage to find fairly decent seats about a third of the way down the hall, and your father notices that an enterprising teacher has actually suspended a Go-Pro camera from the rafters in addition to the video camera and tripod prominently placed in the centre of the audience. To you, these modern devices are commonplace, but I can't help thinking how ironic it is that all these high-tech electronic devices are in place to record the traditional dances that you youngsters have been faithfully learning and practising. When we spoke about this, you asked me, "Isn't this a good thing, Mama?" And it is, I assured you.

Now, when your dance is announced, Papa holds up his camera to capture every moment. You're the third dancer from the left, and we see you straight away when you step onto the stage. Your eyes are shining, and you smile bravely. You can't see me, but you know I'm there. You know I always will be.



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## "Gracias Chopsticks"

by Clifton Bates

"There's nothin' like walking around Macau with diamonds in your shoes,"  
Jewel & drug smuggler in conversation with the author, 1973, Seattle, Washington

Hand me the pastels and a bit of intrigue; I'd like to paint the Macau of the early 1980s, I said to myself as I reflected on that day years ago. Yes, it was a salad bowl of a day, a virtual smorgasbord: a tossed blend of fifty Gurkhas, a hundred male Spaniards, a myriad of Chinese and Portuguese (and mixtures of each), a dash of mysterious refugees and a handful of Gweilos sprinkled here and there.

After disembarking from the jet foil in Macau my friend, Robert, and I successfully maneuvered through the gauntlet of taxis and carts where each driver demanded we be his customers. We escaped from that hectic area and made way to some quiet where we located a sleepy driver parked at the curb unconcerned about hawking his services. We climbed in and proceeded toward the town as I marveled at the contrasting atmosphere and pace from what we left in Hong Kong just over an hour ago. The driver automatically took us to the huge gambling arena assuming we were like most visitors and that was our purpose for being there.

But twenty minutes in the Macau casino was enough for my friend and me. There was a whole new world outside its doors. Why waste our time in this noisy, polished place filled with zombie-like people fixated on playing cards and machines? We tacitly agreed, and we were out of there.

We soon found ourselves standing under the Macau sun in a parking lot in front of a tall, impressive façade: the ruins of St. Paul's Cathedral. There was not a soul in sight as we gazed at the structure. We considered going up the steps when a bus pulled up nearby. The door swung open, and we witnessed the cool, calm, collected, disciplined, orderly unloading

of fifty Gurkha soldiers dressed in polished, black dress shoes, dark blue slacks and light blue, neatly pressed dress shirts: an impressive group of expressionless men.

Instead of heading up the cement stairs, Robert spied a trail off to the right. A sign informed us that it led to Fortaleza de Monte (Mount Fortress). We looked at each other, nodded and began the uphill hike. We found ourselves amid the fifty Gurkhas who decided to take the trek as well. The trail became steep quickly, and the two of us began sweating profusely. Our shirts soon became drenched, and perspiration ran off our faces and soaked our hair. We were only half way up the hillside but already looked like a couple of drowned rats.

But we persevered and reached the top to find all the soldiers calmly looking out over the scene. Robert quietly commented to me that he was willing to celebrate when he spied a slight film of dampness above the upper lip of one the Gurkhas. Other than that they all looked as starched and fresh as when they got off the bus at the trailhead below.

The sun was directly overhead, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. We stood at the corner of the four-hundred-year-old fort overlooking the town with mainland China off in the distance. No mechanical churning going on below in this sleepy, hot town of pastels. We walked around the fort, looked out from its views, examined its old cannons, appreciated its interesting walls and use of stone, and then headed down the paved streets toward the town.

The buildings were soft shades of blue, yellow, and white. These colors along with the colorful clothes hanging to dry on the balconies presented a feeling of festivity, of quiet gaiety. Here the homes, yards and streets, though, were void of people. Must have been siesta time, I considered. Close up, buildings were fine pieces of art. Over time many coatings of various pastel colors peeled away unevenly on the wood and plaster creating a surface in various stages of decay. Concentrate on any square foot section, and it resembled an ancient mosaic, a beautiful, detailed abstract painting where one could easily get lost in its layers and depth.

We reached the leveled area of the shops, cafes and businesses. It was bustling but at a slow pace, nothing close to the flurry and intensity of Hong Kong.

Irregular cobblestones covered the sunny and shady narrow roads and alleys that led off in various directions. An old Chinese lady sat alone at a table that was located in the

middle of a steady stream of people walking by. It was just off a cobblestoned lane of traffic. On a small white plate before her was a little pile of dry, thin, crooked, tan noodles. They were the same color as her parched skin and their texture and shape echoed her frail, skinny, bent body.

There was no time to study her for very long because to my right came this tall, gaunt, ancient lady gliding by with excellent posture. Her loose fitting garments seemed to flow around her in slow motion. She appeared to float a foot off the ground with no movement of her long legs. She looked as if she was riding an invisible Segway.

The bone structure of her face created odd shadows and gave her a ghostly appearance. Her eyes were set deep in their sockets and only the whites of her eyes, which were actually silver, could be seen. She gave no indication she was blind. It seemed she smoothly maneuvered about just fine without pupils and without legs. She disappeared down the shadowed lane, and my attention shifted to the next item of interest.

Our shirts and hair had dried during our walk down from the fort, but we were as thirsty as a couple of boys after a long, summer bike ride. We selected a small café at random, entered and sat at a table by the window. We each ordered a liter of cold Coke and a bottle of white wine. The cold Coke disappeared quickly, then we relaxed and leisurely drank our Portuguese wines with pieces of bread dipped in olive oil.

After our respite, we browsed through some open markets, looked at crickets in cages, strange things from the sea, colorful fruits and vegetables, and then we continued walking down backstreets, alleys and lanes just enjoying this interesting, intriguing town. We spied smugglers, tong members, assassins, secret agents, informants, triad dragons, and other big crime bosses on a continual basis: getting in and out of taxis, standing in shadowy doorways, peering out from curtained windows, and striding by purposefully with head down and wearing sunglasses. Great place to film a James Bond movie we decided. We eventually made our way back to the docks where the evening jet foil waited to return us to Hong Kong.

Evening was quickly coming on, and it was a calm time as we boarded with our carry-on bags full of Portuguese wine and brandies: the loot we were bringing home. We

sat in a wide-open area that later filled with about a hundred male Spaniards. What kind of tourist package was designed for dozens of Spaniard men in their forties all wearing open shirts with thick gold chains drooped on their dark, sweaty chests? It looked like a gang of clones each with a mustache, black hair, open shirt, stoic look, and they all carried an identical shoulder bag.

The jet foil rose up and made way from the dock. As soon as we were the appropriate distance away, it went to high gear, high speed and started flying on the water. We hadn't gone far when a loud, muffled clunk was heard, and the boat lost its flight, plunged down and pushed waves of water as it came quietly to a halt. Everyone was looking around with concerned expressions as we floated calmly on the Pearl River.

There was no announcement as to what was going on, but after about fifteen minutes, Robert and I figured this might take a while. He pointed to a bottle of wine in his bag that looked good to him, and I selected one from mine. Not having a corkscrew was a problem though.

Robert's gold-plated fountain pen wouldn't do the trick. Couldn't get any traction on its slippery surface and my hands just slid along and gained nothing on the resistant cork. We contemplated what we could possibly do to push that cork down into the bottle so we could get to the poetry inside.

A big Spaniard with an open shirt and gold chains around his neck noticed my predicament. He reached into his leather bag and took out a pair of wooden chopsticks, handed them to me and nodded toward the wine. I smiled and nodded back and could tell right away this was a more appropriate tool. I placed the smaller ends of the two chopsticks against the top of the cork, took off my shoe and with the sole firmly tapped the cork as I wrapped my hands around the neck of the bottle and the two sticks where they met the object of resistance. Tap, tap, tap and the cork kindly scooted down until it popped free, fell and floated happily inside the bottle. I handed the bottle to Robert and, since we didn't have any glasses or cups, I repeated the procedure on the bottle from my bag. We were now prepared to sip from our respective bottles and enjoy our circumstances.

I gave my new friend a thumbs-up. He nodded and thinly smiled with a hint of disapproval. I wiped clean the handy tool he provided, and returned it to him. I offered

some liquid refreshment with a toast of the bottle, but he shook his head no and motioned with his hands for us to enjoy, which we proceeded to do.

We noticed a few men from the group standing by the window obviously interested in something going on out there. And rightly so: three overloaded boats bobbed and slowly made way across the river. Scores of Southeast Asians aboard dangled limply from ropes, the sides of the cabins, and any rigging while others sat packed on crowded decks as they hopefully headed to some safety somewhere. I focused on one shirtless man with quiet despair on his face scrunched against a wall on one of the boats. Now how did it happen that I was standing comfortably on this broken down jet foil peacefully drinking Portuguese wine with a good friend while this man experiences anguish and faces frightening uncertainty?

Each boat appeared ready to capsize at any moment. They were fortunate only in that the weather wasn't stormy and the waters were relatively smooth. It was providential also that they appeared on the scene after the wake we caused when breaking down had subsided. Three boats filled with misery, patience, determination and hope. We couldn't tell if they were Laotian, Cambodian, Vietnamese or just what nationality or ethnic group the refugees were. They slowly made way past us and disappeared into the distance while we tried to fathom their possible destination and future. We soberly toasted to their success and returned to our seats.

A good forty minutes had gone by, and it appeared we might be adrift for some time. The most logical thing for us to do was to borrow that effective tool from our friend and open another bottle. We talked for a while then were quiet as we each paid attention to the activity in our minds.

I wondered if a guy could actually have enough things happen in just one day that would allow him to gain any life altering understanding? Besides witnessing or being involved in any near-death experiences I added. Ahhh, a wine-affected examination of things, the kind of foolish, funny thoughts the mind plays tricks with and comes to quick, wine-induced, not-very-well-thought-out conclusions. It is simply a matter that being alive is mystery enough. There *you* go, there *I* go... and we're born with what we are given, we live from what was handed to us at birth and then proceed to make good or bad decisions using varying amounts of inner drive. Blaming some one else is folly. Leave it then for fate

to strike. Meanwhile, make thoughtful decisions, I told myself with gritted teeth: while I wait for fate, bat away evil when it gets close, avoid excessive temptations and continue to strive. Well, I wasn't avoiding excessive temptations at the moment.

What better way to interrupt my bouncing around thoughts than the welcome sound of the jet foil starting up, beginning to move and lift and then take off past junks in full sail and various water craft of different purposes. In about an hour we arrived at the dock in Hong Kong.

Three lines of people converged at the door to disembark. How I recognized the one Spaniard who helped me with opening our wine, I'll never know. But there he was at the exit just as I got there. We nodded and smiled and what could I say but, "gracias chopsticks."

From the docks to Robinson Road, we drove home during a yellow sunset. Robert turned his Mercedes into the entrance area of the tall building of flats. The familiar guard recognized the car and came out from his little hut to open the gate. It was a quizzical look on his usually stoic, stern face as we nodded, smiled and waved to him while we continued singing at the top of our lungs:

"Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah

Zip-A-Dee-A

My oh my, what a wonderful day..."

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Dynamic Duo"**

by Ben Gumienny

Setting: A casual get together with other foreign teachers in Nakhonratchasima, Thailand

The mood is bustling when I enter the house full of foreign teachers. Archna and Punit are outside in the backyard and are in full swing cooking for us. They make quite a formidable twosome. To say that they are in their element is to understate the facts. It would be like saying that the king is royalty, or the pope is holy. I find myself thinking again that either Punit or Archna MUST open a restaurant someday as they effortlessly whip up an Indian feast. Their working relationship is not without its quirks though. Watching them, one gets the impression that they are having a hospitality competition – perhaps where the winner will earn the right to have their own house to hold parties at. In truth, they simply love the hustle and flow of “family” gathering together. They love the busy mélange of the celebration – chaotic, crazy and full of joy.

I ask them if I can help, knowing full well what the answer will be. After the expected, flat denial, I wait around to see if I can find a way to participate anyway. Of course I can't, so I reluctantly move on to the larger group anticipating paltry conversation before a substantial meal. It isn't long before I have managed to melt into the wallpaper (again), and I find myself alone in a crowded room. After making sure that I won't be missed (the Houdini of the party scene), I slip back outside to where the competition is fiercely continuing.

I notice that Punit has no place to put the chapatti, so I pounce on the opportunity like a starving tiger and make myself useful. (Score one for Ben!) I have convinced myself that holding a plate for chapatti makes me a part of the cooking process, and I smile smugly

knowing that I have breached the impenetrable wall of service. It doesn't take long before Punit makes his first attempt to take the plate away from me. I become engaged in a verbal sword fight of sorts, trying to parry each thrust as Punit dances through several reasons why I should put the plate down and go back inside. Luckily, he starts to burn the chapattis and is too distracted to continue a particularly effective line of reasoning.

Soon the food is ready, and the next part of the competition begins. In this stage, Punit and Archna must see who can be the last one to eat in the entire group. They quickly herd everyone into the kitchen, where light protests quickly melt away in the heat of so much delicious food. Soon the general hubbub of mild acquaintanceship subsides into a steady rhythm of chewing and swallowing.

As Punit comes to fill my plate for the third time, I futilely try to convince him to fill a plate of his own. I know he'll refuse, but it is all part of the ritual and I smile to myself at his categorical denial. I settle myself some distance away, thinking that I have at least fifteen more minutes and two chapattis until either of them will begin to fill a plate.

I am fondly watching the dynamic duo overfill everyone's plate, cup and stomach to halfhearted protests. Everyone says "no" while inside they are making room for one more tasty morsel. Of course Archna and Punit know this and push everyone past their usual limits to a place of comfortable culinary inebriation. They catch me watching them from my distant perch, and Punit is instantly concerned about my welfare, suspecting that my empty plate signifies a vacancy in my enjoyment as well. I have long since learned that when I am full, I must be very firm in my refusal of more. They both can sense the slightest sliver of hesitation and no doubt I would have another full plate or cup handed to me.

At long last their competition comes to an end. Everyone has had more than enough food. Although Punit will later slip out to walk to the store for more ice and Archna is actually slipping chips into my mouth while I write this, the time has come for both of them to eat. This culminates in a full-gestured scuffle as the two masters go at it in a fight to the finish.



In the end Archna wins, but only because she plays the undefeatable “Elder Card.” So tradition holds, and Punit eats first with Archna following a close second.

The night is far from over; there will be seating competitions, where another of the guests tries out his chivalry and Archna nearly has to forfeit her seat on the floor. There will also be more drinks served, more cups to fill. And don’t even try to imagine what will happen when it is time for desert. In the end, Punit sums it up best when he finally sits back and sighs, “Ah yes, this is a good Friday night.” Punit, Archna, I couldn’t agree more.

\* \* \* \* \*

## **"A Body in Four Parts"**

*(After the execution of Hermano Pule)*

by King Llanza

### I. Arms

A man of God is at arm's length. Placed  
separately on bamboo sticks, imagine blood dripping  
on the streets from the open wound. Both arms  
each in a different town. Passers-by

fall

silent

as their vision determines

the radius of fear before they speak of  
an arm, from ear to ear.

Should the heart feel uneasy,

think of touch:

men shaking one another's hands.

A woman getting a ring put on her finger.

During mass, singing Our Father.

A father held on both hands by the child

sitting on his shoulders. Or a couple walking

at the park – one arm on his waist,

his on the other's shoulder.

There was blood on the dirt of those streets,

now a dry stain.

Be at ease.

There was once a man of God and he loved  
his land, his people, his beliefs, such that  
an arm's length is at a distance  
to embrace felt  
in more than two towns.

## II. Legs

They must have heard us marching;  
we will not be blinded by fear.  
Our footsteps will be Braille on the ground,  
people will remember how we began gathering  
and standing closely...

*We worship the same god introduced to us, but  
this god will be introduced to our ancestors.*

Yes, we will remember our roots. Here,  
we charged the oppressor. Here,  
some of us died. This was an uprising.  
This will be remembered as the first time we uttered  
farewell to them who keep  
holding us back.

### III. Head

The head of your son in a cage  
placed in front of your house  
is an unpleasant gift, for the earth  
shall own me now.

Forgive me, Mother and Father. I will  
always wear your faces in my own.

### IV. Torso

Detached limbs have never severed anyone's spirit.

We only understand little  
of how the heart is the bravest,  
bird-like in the way  
                                  it beats  
to soar, caged in bones  
fossilized or sun-bleached.

Maybe his soul waited for that  
before leaving.

## **"University Village"**

by King Llanza

I am fond of the streets here, named  
after cities around the world  
long before I was born.

At night, a little younger,  
when I think of going out, my mother  
would tell me stories of danger.  
So, I grew up understanding hurt  
as it dresses me with safety.

There are restless ones  
everywhere in the village, there  
have been crimes. But more so,  
the presence of the past as people  
whose feet never touch the ground—

They have forgotten  
they are forgotten.

\*

When my days in college were over,  
I told myself I'll see the world.  
Books rarely do justice to trees; the mind  
is the first object to exit our solar system.

\*

A visit to a foreign land will never make  
a reflection out of the native's eyes, such  
as the streets here, dirt or cratered

or asphalt, much like the surface  
of earth, moon, and hell. All three  
combined, a sheep, howling, shall be heard  
in the fullness of night.

\*

Thank goodness light pollution isn't  
an issue here. Lampposts flicker  
or turn off in the presence of a human  
sometimes. Stars above seem certain  
of their place. A few headlights pass by,  
a pair of cat eyes reflecting it. In the back  
of your mind, a glinting knife.  
In every direction, possibility.

\*

Sleep can only be fought for so long.  
I met a man tonight and a part of me  
rose as he guided  
                                me into the darkness.  
Where I lay is where X marks the spot.  
No treasure, save for trailing  
hands and burning black fire.  
A little death ensues. Mouth open, wet  
with kisses, I learned fear's nicer brother  
was called thrill.

\*

Home, I forget  
to wash off a stranger's  
mouth on my lips.

Memories are supernatural.

That is how I know we give birth  
to ghosts  
after every parting.

## **"In Secrecy"**

by King Llanza

Remember these places, where  
each had rooms we once owned  
for 180 minutes at a time (A  
measure less the distance of skin  
blending with the other).

In one, we learned how darkness  
illuminates beauty, that the future  
is blind. Heightened senses signal  
a call to warmth, and we tended it  
as though a burning bush  
minus the prophecy.

In this  
heat, we glow as color of

the longest wavelength.

In another, a different date, you  
introduced me to a dictionary  
of unknown gestures,  
one that I will get to know  
once we decide to keep  
the lights on.

Remember that Quiet was once a mute girl,  
taught herself to speak whenever  
we came to hush our presence  
in the world.

Soon enough, she would grow into  
her new name. Silence,  
we made her up to be the Atlas  
holding the weight of the words we  
ache for and never learned to say.

There was one room, half the price  
cheaper than the last—sunlight,  
ceiling fan and mirror. We felt  
heavy and spoke of how we are able  
to delight in imperfection,  
to deprive tomorrow of our worries  
and ignore that we are  
our own stop signs.

I meant to seal  
the doors  
shut



with incomplete  
kisses, but the world keeps  
spinning.

This privacy is slowly  
undone, each time

you  
look at me  
as though my face  
is a blanket of dull knives.

Remember the bed. Remember it  
the most.

The softest waltz,  
humming out of happiness,  
playing love songs,  
and most of all,  
sleep.

Remember, before they turn into dreams.

## **"Pasayahan Festival 2015"**

by King Llanza

Quezon Avenue is closed so the crowd can be a river.  
Each of its side is lined with food stalls, vendors  
selling accessories, henna tattoo parlors,

toys for the children. Distraction  
presents itself as wants and won't-s.  
Turn a corner and here you'll find clothing, there  
pirated DVDs, then more people.

What is happiness?

Walk towards the other end of the avenue  
right where the fiesta stops and look  
at all the booze, in chorus with the loud  
and slurred sentences of mouths.

All of this, every night, for about a week or two,  
until the end of May. I didn't mind  
the local bands performing and competitions,  
the *chami*, a trademark Chinese noodle dish,  
and the people, busy with themselves and  
their company. I am alone,  
neither with or against the flow.

What is happiness?

I leave this crowd to be in another, just as  
there are more women than men on earth,  
towards the carnival.  
Because the emptiest feeling  
is a body subjected to excitement  
when the heart means to escape.

I belong  
here

right now  
but that's not what I wanted;  
Nobody  
was the name I wore  
on the way to  
the town fiesta,  
that I robbed  
myself  
of eyes to see  
what's being celebrated:

culture, talent, history,  
life here—ingredients  
of the community.

What is happiness?

I show a wide smile, and  
eyes without flame.

## **"An Empirical Study on Perennial Things"**

by King Llanza

### I. Statement of the Problem

Where have we been living that

even sorrow cannot be a faithful lover?

## II. Reflections and Experiences

The sea knows its innocence  
through what lives underneath,  
and whom it takes to the shore.

Ankle-deep in the water, an hour past sunrise,  
fishermen are back home, their catch  
now sold at the market  
as I stand looking at the horizon.  
You watch me, I notice  
and dip my index finger wet  
before letting it touch the skin  
between your nose and mouth.  
Which is to say: breathe  
the essence that draws us to the sea,  
for the world did not begin with  
the end in mind.

\*

An ambient light is  
a place is a mood  
the ears know best.

The parking lot on a clear night,  
and just a few lampposts lit, knows how  
to hide our lips  
and show the teeth

as it should be without

me.

Listen to how the sound of cars passing by

makes every uttered word naked.

And once again, the world

is only

Adam and Steve.

### III. How to Proceed

Walk away by yourself.

Look back only when you've gone

far enough.

### IV. Presenting...

...My heart, a perfume

whose scent can only be smelled

in the most silent places. I

recommend the cemetery.

...The stars, faint glitter

over a black backdrop, unseen

when a closer light source is

present.

...Ocean waves, memory keeper,

collecting inscriptions on the shore

even in the resting

of a world unrest.

...Sadness, the one that left.

## V. Conclusion

You will recognize my scent  
in all the nights where I choose  
to remember  
                  or long for the water  
to          erase          me.

I do not want the end  
                                  to begin (it has  
ended, anyway)—

that's where I live;  
                                  it's time to go.

\* \* \* \* \*

## "George Town"

by Shona Levingston

For 6 long years I lived in this place, this steamy scrimmage.

For 6 short years I lived in this place, spice and sacredness.

And a view to the hills is what I had - jungle and a rabble of langurs

Grabbing at fruit-seeds-fruit as they swing, goggle-eyed, above the monitors who would have them for breakfast

And trees, big-leafed, canopy the sky,

Shadowed limbs in static *wayang*,

Applauding hard drops of rain.

And in the town, I looked on: the neem tree stands glorified with flowers, spiritual sentry

Here lead me not to quiet pools of fresh water or fields of green grass, for sacredness is found in drums, and the smoke of incense,

And under the peaceful curve of a white dome.

Here the bells clamour and toll, for joy, sobriety and for the selling of bread.

A yellowed dawn at my window - the day begins as it ends, marked throughout by a devout timekeeper.

And through it, angry traffic, busy woks spicing the narrow lanes and the rickshaw man defying old age with scrawny muscle and conviction.

Iced coffee in a sweating plastic cup or a slosh of frothing tea with a handful of sugar. A hundred different fiery dishes, a tangle of noodles and sprouts, a row of seasonings to burn, salt or pucker with sourness, a taste of the sea.

Bok choy, curled, embryonic, with precious drops of sesame oil.

Chicken charred and bright as a sunset, burning tandoor radiating cavernous heat, steam and sputter, a dosai is pancaked on a searing hotplate.

Dainty cigars of pandanas filled with rice, brackishly-scented with coconut and chilli.

And old trucks filled with coconuts - for eating, for smashing, for conjuring. A lethal *parang* lops the head, making a sweet cup to sip at the water, jelly scraped out and sucked down; old meat tortured into milk for a thousand curries, the fermenting remains on the market floor.

And the broken shell at the temple doorstep, to cleanse and bless.

A motor chugs, mangling the sugar cane for its sweet green juice.

And coloured cloth as bright as chilli, silk and sequins and embroidery. Hats or scarves, or a sprig of jasmine. Or shorts and T-shirt and plastic slippers - save the decoration for your home or temple or put them in a pile and set them on fire. Piles of ashes, the dust of hopes and dreams and spirits.

Temples tell old stories in faded technicolour, of princes and pious sons. Mosques screened and turreted by ancient architects, humming with prayers.

And open drains, with rats the size of cats, fell pedestrians, leaving them to a collective rescue - water fetched to splash on bloodied knees and slippers.

Until - the sun sets behind the hills to the last call to prayer. A reedy song wails a funeral.

But in the hills, the langurs settle, gripping onto yellowed babies.

For 6 long years I lived in this place, this steamy scrimmage.

For 6 short years I lived in this place, spice and sacredness.



\* \* \* \* \*

## **"Shopping for Pomelos at Central Market on Chinese New Year"**

*Phnom Penh, Cambodia, 2017*

by Robert Flinn

The pomelos are jade-green and stacked as precise as pyramids;  
perfect spheres of citrus and Asian mystery; the vendors tell me

they possess secret powers of good fortune and wealth; at that moment  
the universe bursts open for a nano second and I see all and nothing;

maybe that's the essence of enlightenment, a flash of wisdom and confusion  
conjoined like twins among the stars and planets, giving us a fleeting look

at true knowledge; or is it simply *déjà vu*, like meeting the strangers at Sartre's  
bus stop again, that existential split between clarity and complication,

when all things become questions without answers, a kaleidoscope of mirrors  
and colored glass, with veiled reflections and constantly changing patterns.

\* \* \* \* \*

## ***"Neighbours"***

by Malachi Edwin Vethamani

### **(i) Handsome Green Fellow**

A handsome fellow  
in glorious green  
came in uninvited  
into my hall.

He looked away  
made no attempt to move  
I felt he was more irritated  
and heard his thoughts.

You clear our homes  
and make it your own.  
Now call me visitor,  
guest, intruder, pest.

And for your own fancy  
treat me with awe  
call me spirit of your  
deceased.

At child's play  
you might have pulled

my limbs apart  
then smashed with a rock.

I, too, am nature's creature.  
Call me what you want.  
We share a space that was mine.

I am determined  
to shoo him away  
other voices  
say, kill him.

Little green friend,  
if I send you on your way  
will you partake  
of my green treasures?

### **(ii) Sanctuary**

An unknown butterfly  
chose my leaves  
for its next generation  
and flew away.

The eggs lay silent awhile,  
until a motion,  
a moment of new life

stirred within.

A fat folded flesh  
sets on a slow sojourn.  
Consuming ceaselessly  
till a clock within halts.

You spin a silken home  
lie in a nurturing sleep  
unknown and knowing  
what stirs within.

Then a slow nudge  
a tear grows  
cutting the silken threads  
for another beginning.

Creation continued.  
Nature's winged-minion  
sits patiently waiting  
for strength to take flight.

Then it starts again.  
Will you come back  
to the sanctuary  
of my garden?

### **(iii) Maiden Flower**

The bud holds hope  
of not just a new bloom  
but the first ever.

It has been slow in delivering.  
A tinge of yellow teases  
through tight-holding petals.

Maybe I spy too often  
and you are not an exhibitionist  
to the voyeur in me.

You have the company of ants  
need I slay them to preserve you?  
Your sister leaves have a tinge of yellow.

I have not tended you  
as loving gardeners do.  
I just watched you grow.

Should I have toiled a little more?  
Talked to you?  
No prize for the sluggard?

Come forth, maiden flower,  
please my eyes  
and do not treat me unworthy.

Emerge not as ant

tarnishing a torn bloom,  
but whole for me to behold.

**(iv) Bright Eyes Still**

(for Duke)

Your bright eyes  
now lay beneath white-haired brows.

Your wandering days are over  
now you lie under our cars.

The dance that once greeted  
is now your stretching  
and the slight shake of your tail.

Your bright eyes  
softened with time  
still beams your love.

**(v) Kitchen View**

You stand singularly straight  
a whiteness among the green.  
Your petals unfurled

now strike outwards  
each firmly hold its own.

As the day draws on  
you are in fullness.  
Then slowly you recede  
into yourself to a tightness.

Your respite is brief  
and with a new morn  
you replay your loveliness.  
A crowning show  
then no more.

Your once straight stem  
now lies slant and soft  
beauty spent now still.

In the water the guppies  
nibble and shelter  
while you waste away.

**(vi) Black Bird**

A lone black bird  
sits on the water lily pot.  
He sits there with a familiarity.

A welcomed guest  
more than the brightly  
coloured robed feathered  
fiend that feeds on my fish.

He sits silent  
aged  
tired  
no thirst.

His head turns  
has he heard a sound?  
I have not moved.  
Still he sits  
he is in no hurry.

But the world beckons.  
There is little time  
for a black feathered friend  
who might have come  
to say goodbye  
and I need say thank you.